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Notes on the Making of Palm-Leaf Manuscripts in Siam.—

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THERE is no more common sight in any of the temples or “wats” in Bangkok, or indeed in any part of Siam, than that of one or more Buddhist students or priests squatting on the floor of the balcony of their houses and engaged more or less busily in preparing palm-leaf manuscripts of some of the sacred books of Siam.

Printing has of late years made a little headway in displacing hand work for the reproduction of the sacred books of the priests, but it is still looked upon with some disfavor by the more conservative members of the priesthood, and is moreover much more expensive than the writing on palm leaves, which costs nothing at all unless it be a great deal of time. Of that, however, Siamese, like other Buddhist priests, have a great deal to spare.

A few words on the method and materials employed in the manufacture of palm-leaf manuscripts among the Siamese may not be without interest to those who have never been in a Buddhist land.

The process is about as follows: The leaves of the palm tree are brought in from the country in large bundles, each leaf being about eighteen inches long and doubled in the middle. These leaves are given to the priests by the peasants as a means of “making merit.”¹ The first operation in converting the leaves into the finished manuscript is to divide them by cutting out the midrib, thus making two leaves of each leaf of the tree. These leaves are then made up into bundles of some hundred pieces each and are then placed between boards tightly tied up and wedged in a press. While still there the edges of the

¹ Sometimes the preliminary operations just described are done by persons outside the wats and then the products sold or given to the priests. It was from such outside persons that I used to obtain the leaves which my scribe needed in his copying of manuscripts.

leaves are trimmed smoothly with a semi-circular knife which is in a handle some two feet long. After sanding the leaves to give them a smooth surface for writing or rather inscribing, the bundles are then ready for the next stage in the book-making process.

After the surface of the leaves has been sanded and made in good condition for receiving the strokes of the scribe's stylus, the actual copying of the books can begin. Each copyist has in front of him, as he squats on the floor of the temple, a frame about eighteen inches in height somewhat resembling an artist's easel, on one ledge of which rests the manuscript to be copied and on the other ledge the blank leaves for the new volume. The pen or rather stylus is a needle point like the needle of a sewing machine, inserted in a wooden handle like an enormous cigar about eight inches in length. Before doing any writing the scribe marks lines, usually five in number, on each leaf by means of strings which are placed in a frame with the ends tied and the rest loose. These strings are then blackened with soot from the bottom of a rice pot and the strings are placed in position over the palm leaf and then snapped. The result is a series of lightly marked black lines on the leaf which serves the writer as a guide for his stylus. The copyist then holds the blank leaf in his hand and with the needle point scratches the letters of the text on the prepared surface of the leaf. It is remarkable how the writer holds the leaf in his hand and does not rest it upon any surface for steadiness. The letters when scratched are of course almost invisible unless carefully examined, as no coloring matter is put on the pen point. In order to render the writing clearer the entire surface of the leaf is smeared with soot and then wiped off and scoured with clean sand. The black adheres to the scratches and is removed from the rest of the surface by the sand. When a sufficient number of pages are ready they are placed in a press and the edges trimmed off and sometimes gilded. The leaves are formed into volumes by being tied together by a string running through holes in the middle of the leaf. Each leaf is usually written on both sides, so that there are two pages of five lines each on every palm leaf.

A book almost always consists of twelve, and a double book of twenty-four leaves.

During my stay in Siam I nearly always had a scribe working at copying Siamese Pāli manuscripts of the chief works of the modern Buddhism of Siam. The manuscripts in the possession of the priests or temples in Siam are considered so holy that it is only with the greatest difficulty that the priests can be induced to part with them. The result is that it is necessary to copy nearly everything that is desired for purposes of study and research.

I was particularly favored in obtaining, through the kind offices of H.R.H. Prince Damrong, himself a very keen student of the antiquities of Siam, the loan of a number of rare and beautiful manuscripts of Buddhist works. I was also fortunate in receiving from several missionary friends copies of old and valuable Shan and Laos manuscripts and one fragment of a Peguan text. The script employed in these is very similar to that used in the Siamese manuscripts proper, but varies from them to the degree to be expected in a writing which has suffered such vicissitudes of fortune as the Shan and Peguan scripts.

It is to be hoped that the project of establishing a national library at Bangkok for the purpose of preserving the ancient manuscripts, which was taken up just before my departure from Siam in the early part of 1906, will not be allowed to drop. If the library is established, it will be a worthy complement to the Wang Nah Museum in Bangkok, where through Prince Damrong's influence a most creditable collection of inscriptions, cylinders, and other archeological specimens of ancient Siam are gathered together and suitably exhibited.

A systematic search through the temples scattered so plentifully over Siam would doubtless reveal the presence of many manuscripts of great value for the scientific study of Siamese Buddhism and might even bring to light some works altogether unknown to scholars. This search should be made by properly accredited agents of the Ministry of the Interior, and the manuscripts when found should be loaned by the priests to the national library in Bangkok, where they would be accessible to all students. If necessary, copies could be made and left with the temples whence the originals had been taken.